

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM'S  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR, ENERGY, AND ENVIRONMENT

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Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present a statement regarding the treatment of patients evacuated from the territory's hospitals in the wake of hurricanes Irma and Maria. As this committee reviews the federal government's response after the storms and attention is paid to debris removal, restoration of electricity, and the issuance of SNAP cards, it is vital that you not lose sight of the 682 individuals who were medically evacuated from the Virgin Islands following the hurricanes and the manner in which those evacuations were handled.

In his State of the Territory address presented on January 22, 2018, Governor Kenneth E. Mapp noted that of the 682 persons evacuated for medical reasons, some 248 still remained on the mainland at that time. Since then, I have asked, what happened to the other 434 persons? How many of them came back home in the cargo section of the plane? How many came back in urns in someone's carry-on luggage? I can tell you specifically about the ones I know of, including my son-in-law, the aunts of two of my step-daughters, a very dear friend, and the relatives of other persons with whom I have spoken or whose stories have been reported in the news:

Sergeant Aaron K. Hodge, Sr. died in Atlanta, Georgia November 15, 2017

Ashley Frett, Sr. died in Atlanta, Georgia November 15, 2017

Cynthia Thomas died in Atlanta, Georgia October 25, 2017

Aureo Correa Rivera died in Puerto Rico January 13, 2018

Almarina Palmer died in Austell, Georgia January 2, 2018

This is but a small sample of persons who died away from home, away from loved ones after having been taken from the Virgin Islands by FEMA. The stories of lack of communication with family, of patients being lost, of persons being evacuated without their medication, or proper identification, or without a change of clothing are very much the same. Permit me to tell the story which I know best, that of Virgin Islands Police Department Sergeant Aaron K. Hodge, Sr. who was a patient at the Roy Lester Schneider Hospital when hurricane Irma hit. He was evacuated first to St. Croix and then later to Puerto Rico. He was able to make contact, and we knew that he was in Puerto Rico, but exactly where we did not know. Through the contact of friends, my daughter was able to get a telephone number of the hospital in Puerto Rico and the person with whom she spoke told her that the "refugees from the Virgin Islands were going to be placed in shelters." This is not hearsay. I was standing close enough to hear what was said. I

am not sure what the conditions of those shelters were, but the reports coming from other evacuees who were able to call into the radio station painted a picture of horrendous conditions. Nonetheless, my daughter and I went to VITEMA the next day seeking information. The person who was VITEMA's liaison to the hospital could not even get through to the people in Puerto Rico to get any information for us. We were told to contact Mr. Reuben Molloy, of the Department of Health, as he was the one responsible for coordinating the evacuations. We called and left messages, but never received a return call. While Aaron was in Puerto Rico he told me that drinking water was being rationed. He was being given water in a container the size of a small fruit cup. That's about three ounces. This was what was being given to a full, grown adult. Sergeant Hodge was eventually evacuated to Atlanta Georgia, where he died on November 15, 2017.

We are just one family. This is just one story. How many other hundreds of Virgin Islanders have similar stories to tell? When will the hearing be held to allow them to tell of the conditions under which their loved ones died. *The Virgin Islands Daily News* of Tuesday, February 20, 2018 tells the story of Ashley Frett, Sr. as recounted by his daughter. You ask about the Federal Government's response. According to Avril Frett, FEMA lost her father. She said she was horrified by the lack of coordination and communication from those tasked with managing the evacuations. She was the one who had to call around to several hospitals until she found her father. Similarly, Mr. Aureo Correa's family was told that he was sent to St. Croix. When they asked relatives in St. Croix to go and check on him, they discovered that he was not in St. Croix but had been sent to Puerto Rico where he was placed in a tent rather than being placed in a hospital room. In all instances, the local officials said they were not responsible for the patients because FEMA was the entity which removed them from the territory. Therefore, FEMA was responsible.

Fortunately, there are persons who were evacuated, who survived, but their accounts of the treatment they received are equally appalling. Ophelia Torres, a retired nursing Professor at the University of the Virgin Islands, lays out in graphic detail in a two-part interview in the *St. Thomas Source*, the awful treatment she received once she was evacuated to Puerto Rico.

There is no way in this brief statement to adequately capture the magnitude of pain and suffering endured by medical evacuees and their families at the hands of those who were responsible for their care. Each family needs an opportunity to share their experience with this process and get the answers deserved from those responsible.

Among the questions we would like answered are:

1. Exactly what was the Federal Government's role in evacuating patients from the territory?
2. How many patients were taken from each district?
3. Where was each person taken?

4. What was the final disposition of each patient? (i.e. how many died, how many came back home alive, how many are still away, how many are lost and unaccounted for)
5. Is the Federal Government going to provide funds to return the remaining persons from the mainland?
6. Is the Federal Government going to reimburse families for the cost of returning their deceased loved ones?
7. Whose responsibility was it to notify families that their loved ones were being evacuated?

Answers to these questions will not bring back the people we have lost. However, if the full truth about what happened to all the persons evacuated for medical reasons were to be revealed, maybe both the federal and local governments can better prepare to handle similar situations in the future, should the need arise.

Thank you for the opportunity to place this statement on the record.